

Interview with Titus Moolathara of the Free Library of Philadelphia

Elizabeth: Hello, and welcome to Beyond the Stacks: Innovative Careers in Library and Information Science. I'm your host, Elizabeth Reilly and I am very excited for this month because we will be releasing not 1 but 2 episodes! I am originally from the Philadelphia area and when I was home on winter break this December, I had the wonderful opportunity to interview three librarians who work in the Free Library of Philadelphia. These librarians approach education, literacy and community building with innovative projects and programming. First, you'll hear from Titus Moolathara who initiated the Free Library's Prison Services program. And then in the middle of the month, we will publish the episode with Liz Fitzgerald and Suzanna Urminska of the Culinary Literacy Center at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Titus Moolathara came to the Free Library of Philadelphia from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, where he worked in the prison library. In 2013, he initiated the Free Library's Prison Services program that reaches out to incarcerated patrons, their families and children. The Prison Services offers library services inside the city prisons, and also offers Stories Alive, a family tele-visiting program to encourage family literacy and family bonding. Titus holds a masters of art and masters of philosophy in History both from Jamia Millia Islamia University in India and a MSLIS from Drexel University. I hope you enjoy listening to Titus and I speak about his career path and current work!

Titus: I am Titus Moolathara. I am the library supervisor of Widener Free Library branch. I did my studies part in India I did Master of Arts in history from Delhi and master of philosophy in history from Delhi. I came to this country and um didn't find a job so I ended up going to library school

Elizabeth: Ok. When did you come to the United States?

Titus: I came in 2008 and that's when you had the great recession.

Elizabeth: Oh yeah! Not the best time.

Titus: And probably not because of me.

Laughing.

Elizabeth: So what did you come here hoping to do?

Titus: I....My wife, she was here, she is from this place, this country.

Elizabeth: Ok.

Titus: And that's how I came to this country.

Elizabeth: Ok so, you get here in 2008 and there's nothing for you to do so why did you choose library school instead of, you know, some other degree?

Titus: I wanted to get into teaching career I was a teacher in Delhi. I love teaching, I love spending time with children. I know the impact teaching has on children. So when I came to Philadelphia, you were in a very bad situation. People were being laid off. And there were, no, not any jobs that were promising. I got introduced to the libraries from one of our family members. He works for the library. That's how I got to know about the free library system. I used to visit the local library regularly and see how the library is impacting the community. Various programs, job search, um programs for immigrants - that really helped me understand what the library could do. I used to watch the librarian and I really loved the job, the way they impacted the communities. So that kind of drew me to this profession. And I used to imagine what I could do when I become a librarian. And that's how I started searching for library schools and I ended up at Drexel.

Elizabeth: When you were growing up, did you go to the local libraries? Or I guess...I don't know...what is the library system like where you grew up?

Titus: We don't have a good public library system in New Delhi. One of the drawbacks in that big city. Much of my public library exposure comes from Philadelphia. And um, it's a short time, yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah, yeah. So when you went to school at Drexel, what...did you study a certain concentration of library science or what did you think you were going to do, what kind of librarianship, I guess?

Titus: I wanted to get a job real quick. So I didn't want to concentrate on one particular area. so I took public librarianship; I took academic librarianship. Kind of mixed different concentrations in order to make my field broad to help me get a job quickly.

Elizabeth: Yeah that makes sense. Did you have a favorite class at Drexel?

Titus: Yes, I had this class that dealt with programmings and reaching out to communities. I don't remember the title, the name of the course. But that was very challenging. That kind of expanded my short, or narrow vision of what public libraries are all about. Public libraries I learned from that course that we are not just about the space but we are about meeting the needs of the community. Going out to where the community is at and using this space to create knowledge or to have an interaction with the communities meeting their needs.

And we also had internships in our program so I did internships at Historical Society of Pennsylvania for a couple of times. Worked with archival projects. And I also interned at a hospital in the medical library. So that was a different experience all together. I helped them with their archiving their photographic images. Then they were migrating from their existing cataloging system to a newer version so I helped them with that as well.

Elizabeth: Cool, that's really interesting. Did you have any other interesting opportunities during your studies in addition to those internships?

Titus: Um I was looking forward to getting into academic librarianship because of my advanced degrees. And I was...even though I had taken all these concentrations. I really loved working in an academic setup. I didn't find that job. I ended up in a different job all together.

Elizabeth: And what job was that?

Titus: I did this exam with the state civil service commission and the list that they gave me was for a state prison library. I never wanted to work in a prison library and coming from a different country and from culture and this was the biggest shock I would say my job. But I learned some very good lessons for life in that, in that job.

Elizabeth: How long were you in that job?

Titus: I worked there for a year and a half.

Elizabeth: Ok. So what were some of those good lessons that you learned?

Titus: I learned that prison library is the most important place in any prison. You have people waiting to get into the prison library. People are waiting in their housing blocks to get to the library and check out books and be there for sometime, read something new and escape from the harsh environment. I also found a lot of people who come to the prison library they have never visited the public libraries when they were on the outside. I have found people they were teaching themselves to read and I found dictionaries are very popular in prisons. Because they are checking out...they want to learn the words, understand the words, understand the words they are readings or encountering for the first time.

Elizabeth: Yeah. That's amazing. How many people would staff that library?

Titus: Prison libraries are pretty much like public libraries. But then they are more restricted. So we have library assistants working at the circ desk and those are staffed by inmates. Then we have the regular librarians who have their master's degree and library assistants working in that library. So it's a busy place, it's open 7 days a week from morning til late in the evening.

Library looks like a regular, public library, and probably I think that is one of the factors, the space that draws the inmates. Plus of course the books and the resources. We did reach out to inmates who weren't allowed to come to the library. So on a particular day we reached out to those restricted housing units. We had our book carts and we went with our carts to those cells and we pretty much helped them with their reading requests.

Elizabeth: So this might be a silly question but do you miss anything working in that setting versus this setting or not really?

Titus: I am glad that I am out, I am free. But so much I learned there. And that really helped me start something with the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Elizabeth: Do you think if you hadn't worked there that you would have seen or....seen the need for the prison services currently offered, like your project that you designed or...?

Titus: I think not. Yeah, I would not have understood the value libraries bring for inmates and also the returning citizens.

Elizabeth: Where was this prison, again?

Titus: It was in Huntington County. It's 200 miles from Philadelphia.

Elizabeth: Ok, yes I recognize the name...So then how did you transition to that job to...was your next job at the Free Library?

Titus: Yup. I was somehow looking to get out from the state prison. So I got this offer at the Free Library of Philadelphia and was very excited. I got a job at the main branch. I was in the Education Department. Helping with collection development and references. But um some lessons that you learn in life, you never forget. I kept meeting people who were returning from the prisons. They were searching for jobs, searching for books, taking part in different programs. So these people keep coming back to us and um that really helped me understand what impact the library has on people not just on the inside but when they come out as well.

Elizabeth: Right. I guess the prison services offered by the Free Library, you helped to set those up...or?

Titus: Yeah. I had one returning citizen from the city prison come to us and tell us that they didn't have any libraries on the inside. So that kind of gave us the spark to start something with the city prisons. We started a pilot program in the fall of 2013. We approached them they were excited and we were excited too that we got the permission. We started a pilot program for 3 months in one of the housing blocks. They asked us to do a housing block because the prison wanted to know whether if

this would be successful or not. During the 3 months we had 600 books and 316 visits by inmates. They checked out a whole lot of books. It was a great experience for us. And during that time we also trained inmate workers to do the circulation because we knew that we couldn't go there regularly to run the libraries. The pilot was successful and during that time we trained some inmates for circulation.

We also heard that the altercations amongst library users dropped and that was very encouraging for us. So the prison system gave us the permission to expand the libraries so right now we are in 3 city jails. That is half of the city prison system. We are in Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, we are at Riverside Correctional Facility and that is a female facility. We recently started at the Alternative and Special Detention Unit. Right after the pilot program we were also told that the library users were taking part in the "Messages from Dad" program. That is a video recording of inmate reading a book and the DVD is sent to the child. So we put our heads together and we thought, "hey why not skype this program to local neighborhood library", where the child can come in, can walk 2 blocks away from his house. Come with a caregiver or the family member and have a time of family bonding and family literacy. So we applied for IMLS Sparks! Grant, which we got. We concluded the grant last, last month. And we'll be busy preparing for the reports. So the grant was successful, the project was successful. And the library has agreed to expand the program. So we are very excited.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Now, when you say 'we,' who is, like, your team?

Titus: Right now, I have a Project Coordinator she works part time, her name is **Meeka**. She's helping us a lot to run Stories Alive. The library has also given us the permission to hire 2 more part time positions for Stories Alive. So we are expanding.

Elizabeth: Right. Does Stories Alive take place at certain branches?

Titus: Stories Alive takes place on Saturdays at 3 branches. All these branches have higher incarceration rates. So we decided to pick these branches so it's easier for family members to come at these locations. So on a given day, on a Saturday, the family comes in and we coordinate the session with the prison system. So at the given time, the inmate and the family member, we do the session together. Pretty much like Skyping. We have the same set of books at the library and also at the prison. Books focusing on family and education and reading. So the child comes in. they read, they have a good time of reading and family bonding time. These are very emotional sessions for us.

Elizabeth: I can imagine.

Titus: They child might be seeing their parent after many months. "Dad, where were you? I miss you so much. When are you coming home?" It's emotionally very strong and hard for us to sit through, too. We also have children singing songs and praying for their parents to come back home soon. So it's been going very good.

Elizabeth: Yeah. How many families have you had, how many individual families have participated in the program?

Titus: We started the pilot in February and we concluded in November. During that time we had close to 40 to 45 sessions. That includes repeat sessions as well. But then I believe that as we expand we will have more participants.

Elizabeth: Yeah, that's really great. How do you advertise it?

Titus: We have PSAs running in the family visiting rooms at prisons. The prison staff is also very excited about this program because they understand the positive impact it has on inmates as well as on the children. So the social workers inside prisons, they, who work with inmates, they advertise the program as well. So we have inmates waiting on the sign-up sheets, we have a big list.

Elizabeth: That's encouraging, though. Um so you also sort of help with the reentry, like after they exit prison, reentry to the city, living in society, how does that process work out? Like what do you do?

Titus: As part of the grant we also prepared, we designed a Reentry Guide that has all the resources a returning citizen needs when he or she comes back to the city. Information about jobs, information about health, housing, addiction, introducing the library system. We give this reentry guide to the family after the Stories Alive session. We also are trying to work out with the prison system to hand a reentry guide when the inmate is ready to come back.

Elizabeth: Yeah, that makes sense. So was there really nothing like that for people reentering before this program?

Titus: I guess there have been reentry guides but they weren't updated and there are many reentry agencies that are helping folks coming back from prison but nothing from the library's perspectives.

Elizabeth: Right, so I guess what do you think are the unique things that come out of the library perspective?

Titus: We get the opportunity to introduce the library and its services. We believe that more inmates use libraries on the inside, they tend to use libraries when they come back. So it would be a very good tool to hand over, a reentry guide from the library's perspective because they can make use of immense resources the library has to offer. Be it job search, be it computer classes, be it different programs and services that the library offers them for free.

Elizabeth: So do you work directly with any people who are reentering? Like after the prison?

Titus: We...right now, we haven't expanded to that extent but that should be one of our goals to work with people who are coming back and help them with their reentry process.

Elizabeth: I know you mentioned the Stories Alive can be emotionally intense and challenging and I guess, what are some other challenging parts of your job here?

Titus: We are still in the expansion phase with Prison Services. It is not a fully staffed program. Part time staff is pretty much helping to run this program so staffing is a challenge. And the library system is well aware of it. And they're working to give us full time staff for this program. And I believe challenges can be different at different stages. We had challenges when we started the program, those were different from the challenges we have right now.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And then what are some of the most rewarding parts?

Titus: When you see the joy in the eyes of the child meeting their parent after so many days or months or years. There are no words for that. It's just overwhelming to see the child and the parent excited to be able to see their child. I need not emphasize the impact it would leave on the child and also on the parent about the libraries. As part of the program, we are also giving library cards to participants. We also figured out most of the participants have fines on their cards so we have been forgiving the fines and encourage them to use the library services.

Elizabeth: That's wonderful. What kind of books...So you mentioned the books focus around families and education and that's specifically for the Stories Alive program. And then so what other books tend to be available in prison libraries?

Titus: Majority of our collection is popular fiction. I would say 95% of the collection is popular fiction because that is in high demand. The rest is education, career, high interest in low vocabulary and graphic novels.

Elizabeth: I guess and so I've heard I guess I'm thinking so in like children's libraries in a public school, I've heard that people criticize it for maybe not being diverse in their authors or subject matter. I guess how does that play out in the prison library setting?

Titus: We were fortunate to have a very supportive administration inside the prison. They are very supportive about the prison libraries in fact we have gotten inquiries about when we are expanding to other city jails. They have been very supportive of the books we send. I understand that certain prisons ban certain books, certain genres. But so far the prison has been very supportive. They don't want us to send books that might be dealing with how to make bombs, how to make tools to escape the prisons but pretty much they have been pretty supportive.

Elizabeth: That's really good to hear. So I talked your colleagues at the main branch at the Culinary Literacy Center. Is there any cross over between what you guys do like do you list that as a resource for people who are reentering?

Titus: I think the Culinary Literacy Center has programs running for people coming back from prison. They did a couple programs I think last year on literacy on food literacy and nutrition for people coming back from prison. We haven't got a chance to work together till now but that should be one of our goals to work together.

Elizabeth: I know that both of you guys are short staffed and just you are, sort of working to your limits. It is really that the Free Library is supporting these kinds of programs.

Titus: Yeah. And also the free library is organized on a cluster model. These clusters are a group of libraries that are focusing on community needs. So like in North Philadelphia we have a cluster of libraries that is focusing just on the needs of this library. We have a great need...people here in this area, we have people who are very poor. We have issues with youth violence and low literacy rates. So in this cluster we are focusing how we can address those needs and help this community.

Elizabeth: And is there... this is back to library school days, but um is there any advice to current library students? Like I don't know...maybe to broaden their horizons or something...

Titus: Yeah, yeah of course. This is such a field that is so broad that one can create their passion or they can follow their passion with this profession. I am so glad...I sometimes I call myself an advocacy librarian who is working towards social justice and making neighborhoods and communities better. So that really is a big motivation for me to come every day for my job that we are doing something very important that is impacting so many people and families and the neighborhoods. So um this profession is wonderful, I would say. Because it helps us...it helped me to follow my passion.

Elizabeth: Yeah no, I think this is a wonderful program and I will be sure to follow its progress. Is there anything you want to say to people, you kinda just said it, people who think public libraries are dying, they're not needed anymore, kind of thing.

Titus: I believe the opposite. We are a needed institution. Like for instance in this community, our library is the heart of the community. We do so much programming, we are a very busy place. We have people coming in for job search. We have people coming in to understand about their health. We have children coming in after school, after 3 o'clock this is a very busy place. We have the Stories Alive program running. We are also going to start a program for children who have disciplinary issues in schools. We have high youth violence in this area so we are working to start a program, it's called Reading Based Diversion program. So we will be working

with Department of Human Services who would refer students to us. and we would be introducing book discussion at their reading level. Where they would be discussing characters similar to them. And understanding the fact that every response need not be violent but they can raise their opinions and disagree with their opinions. So we hope this program will be beneficial for this community. So we do so much so public libraries are not just about books or shelves, it's so much about communities and meeting their needs.

Elizabeth: Yeah definitely. Well I agree and that is one of the reasons why I decided to talk to you! Thank you so much for telling us about the prison services and I wish you luck!

Titus: Thank you so much for having me.